

Summer reading program canceled in Montgomery

County is the only one not participating in statewide program

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Wednesday, June 30, 2010

http://www.gazette.net/stories/06302010/potonew221241_32547.php

Montgomery County Public Libraries is hoping to prove that children's love of reading goes beyond prizes and T-shirts.

Decreased staffing — a result of county budget cuts — has forced the library system to suspend its participation in the popular statewide summer reading program, said Michele Sellars, county library public services administrator for community engagement and outreach. The library system is decreasing hours at most branches and shuffling many employees to new locations.

As part of a 23 percent reduction in funding for fiscal 2011, the library system will lose 80 positions, said county library business manager Eric Carzon. Fiscal 2010 budget cuts forced the system to eliminate 60 positions.

Montgomery County is the only county in the state suspending its participation in the Maryland State Department of Education's summer reading program, said Bill Reinhard, a department spokesman.

"I think it's unacceptable that Montgomery County is the only county not to participate in it," said Ari Brooks, executive director of Friends of the Library Montgomery County, a volunteer support group for libraries. The nonprofit usually pays the \$45,000 needed for the summer program.

"We have the money to fund it, that's not the issue," Brooks said. "I think they were being careful and cautious until things shook out and they knew if they had staffing capacity to run the program."

Previously, children who registered for the summer reading program in Montgomery County received a game board to track their reading progress, prize incentives for completing tasks and a T-shirt and certificate for completing the program. There will be no game boards available this year, but some programs will continue.

This year, the Friends of the Library Montgomery County are sponsoring and managing several countywide children's programs, such as puppet shows, guest performances and educational presentations. Local Friends chapters may provide additional programming.

Last year, 23,000 children signed up for the summer reading program in Montgomery County, Carzon said.

"It was very staff-intensive in the way it was done," Carzon said. "So much was going into the little pieces of plastic and stuff. There was all this paperwork to do, managing certificates and managing shirts — it's a huge time drain. Having 20 percent less staff to do the program, you just can't have them deployed running around doing these little tasks."

Libraries also will be limited to running three staff-run early literacy development programs per month, Carzon said. These programs, such as preschool story times, are run by trained librarians. All staff-run adult programming, such as librarian's reading groups, also has been cut.

About 200,000 people attend programs every year, he said, but staffing the library counter which receives 1 million requests for help each year needs to be the first priority.

At the Potomac Library, which is losing half a position and reshuffling many others, manager Lindsey Hundt said young readers will not need a game to keep them motivated.

"It's never a struggle here to get a child to read. The libraries are really popular in our system," Hundt said. "While it is fun, they love getting prizes, what really turns them on is getting the books. That always far outweighs the prizes."

Lucy Justement of Potomac has been taking her children to the Potomac Library to participate in the summer reading program for years. Her son, Gavin loves to use his library card to check out books.

"I think that it was fun and all but I also didn't like this one part that there was just a little bit of space and there was so much I read," said Gavin, 6. He read 18 books last summer, and complained that he read so much it couldn't fit in his reading log. "I mostly read Dr. Seuss books, and I second mostly read 'Fly Guy' books."

Now that there is no summer reading program, Lucy Justement has been helping her children log their summer reading.

"I myself think it was a nice program," Lucy Justement said. "For our family, we're going to keep motivating them to do what the program had set up."

There is a reading log available on the county libraries website, as well as suggested reading lists for Pre-K through high school students.

"I'll miss it. I know my daughter will miss it. I definitely think that teachers will miss it. I think that a lot of librarians might miss it too. They poured so much energy and time and effort into it to making it such a great program," Brooks said. "I hope people miss it enough that they ask. I hope people will be called to action, if it takes something like this to get attention of the legislative officials then there could be something positive to come out of it."

For a full list of summer events visit, montgomerycountymd.libguides.com/summer2010